

Contemporary Christian Family Life in the Light of the Teachings of *Amoris Laetitia*

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Abstract

The post-modern society is challenging the traditional concept of family life. Even though family continues to be the basic unit of a society, there is an increasing trend to subdue the importance of familial values. In such a situation, Christian families have a difficult task to live according to the values of the gospel. Pope Francis in Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* notes the importance of Christian faith for the integral well-being of individuals in a family. In this paper, we shall examine the teachings of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* to help Christian families to re-assert the importance of the institution of family in the contemporary society.

Introduction

Family serves as the backbone of human society. Christians value the familial bond of love, which forms the basis of a sound society. However, in an increasingly secularized world, some people question the traditional definition of marriage and family. This poses a serious challenge to the social institutions of marriage and family. Pope Francis notes the importance of faith in Christian families to counter the onslaught of secularization. He further raises the various problems, which the families face in the contemporary world and offers practical suggestions to deal with these problems. In this paper, we shall examine the importance of spirituality in Christian families in the light of the teachings of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (AL). We shall also examine the teachings of the AL on dealing with the various problems, which the families face in the contemporary world.

1. The Importance of Spirituality in Families

Faith in the Holy Trinity is the foundation of Christian faith.¹ The fellowship between the

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 234. Available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p2.htm (accessed July 16, 2016).

three persons of the Holy Trinity serves as a model par excellence to all humans to live in fellowship with one another.² Family serves as a basic unit of a society, wherein individuals learn the art of living in fellowship with one another. Pope Francis notes that Christian families need to promote fellowship within their respective families.

The word of God tells us that the family is entrusted to a man, a woman and their children, so that they may become a communion of persons in the image of the union of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Begetting and raising children, for its part, mirrors God's creative work. The family is called to join in daily prayer, to read the word of God and to share in Eucharistic communion, and thus to grow in love and become ever more fully a temple in which the Spirit dwells.³

Pope Francis further notes "Marriage and the family have been redeemed by Christ (Eph 5:21-32) and restored in the image of the Holy Trinity, the mystery from which all true love flows."⁴ By referring to the Holy Trinity, Pope Francis emphasizes the need to support one another in a family. If family members love and care for one another, then they can extend their love and care for others. Even though there are no perfect families, the Holy Trinity can serve as a model of hope. Christian families need to value the sacrament of matrimony as it forms the ground to build a healthy family.⁵ Pope Francis encourages Christian families to hold on to values of marriage and family life. He notes the following reasons for it,

First, because it represents an invitation to Christian families to value the gifts of marriage and the family, and to persevere in a love strengthened by the virtues of generosity, commitment, fidelity and patience. Second, because it seeks to encourage everyone to be a sign of mercy and closeness wherever family life remains imperfect or lacks peace and joy.⁶

In the contemporary world, with the rapid spread of secularization it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the importance of institutions of marriage and family. There is growing number of youth who are disenchanted with the day-to-day affairs of the world. They are losing faith in traditional social institutions like marriage and family. Therefore, senior couples need to teach them the importance of these traditional institutions through their own lives. They need to witness their commitment to married and family life. Their witness of life rather than sermons can be of far more value to the youth, to value the institutions of marriage

² AL no. 11. See also Timothy George, *God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2006), 72-83

³ AL no. 29.

⁴ AL no. 63. See also *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 14.

⁵ See Donald Gelpi, *The Committed worship: The Sacraments of Ongoing Conversion* (Collegeville: A Michael Glazier Book, Liturgical Press, 1993), 64-65.

⁶ AL no. 5.

and family.⁷ Pope Francis too urges the senior couples to help the younger generation to understand the importance of the traditional social institutions. He notes,

We need to find the right language, arguments and forms of witness that can help us reach the hearts of young people, appealing to their capacity for generosity, commitment, love and even heroism, and in this way inviting them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage.⁸

Family is the basic unit of society. Destruction of family would result in creating an unstable society. People would find it difficult to relate to one another if they do not learn the art of interpersonal relationship within their families. Pope Francis cautions about the impending dangers in a society, which allows the weakening of the institutions of marriage and family. He notes,

[T]he weakening of the family... poses a threat to the mature growth of individuals, the cultivation of community values and the moral progress of cities and countries. There is a failure to realize that only the exclusive and indissoluble union between a man and a woman has a plenary role to play in society as a stable commitment that bears fruit in new life.⁹

In the post-modern world, family members often relegate the need to communicate to one another and take refuge in cyber relationships.¹⁰ This may lead to distrust among family members. Therefore, it is very important, especially for the elders to encourage the young to have strong interpersonal relationship within the family and with others. They need to convince the children to communicate with their parents. In spite of all the difficulties, which the modern world poses, family members need to trust one another and give no space for unhealthy feelings to rise among themselves. Pope Francis notes,

It is important for Christians to show their love by the way they treat family members who are less knowledgeable about the faith, weak or less sure in their convictions. At times the opposite occurs: the supposedly mature believers within the family become unbearably arrogant. Love, on the other hand, is marked by humility; if we are to understand, forgive and serve others from the heart, our pride has to be healed and our humility must increase.¹¹

⁷ See Richard Olson & Joe Leonard, Jr., *A New Day for a Family Ministry* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 64-102.

⁸ AL no. 40.

⁹ AL no. 52.

¹⁰ See Andrea Castro et al., "Adolescents, the Internet and Sexuality," in *The Effects of the Internet on Social Relationships: Therapeutic Considerations*, eds. Joan Atwood & Conchetta Gallo, (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2011), 27-66.

¹¹ AL no. 98.

Lack of love and forgiveness among family members can increase angst in the family. A Christian family needs to be a place of forgiving and receiving forgiveness.¹² In day-to-day life, at times family members err and rub shoulders with one another. However, these untoward events should not create walls among family members. Family members need to overcome ego issues and mutually accept each other. Pope Francis notes the importance of forgiveness in Christian families in order to bring healing and root out resentment from heart. He notes,

Yet we keep looking for more and more faults, imagining greater evils, presuming all kinds of bad intentions, and so resentment grows and deepens. Thus, every mistake or lapse on the part of a spouse can harm the bond of love and the stability of the family. Something is wrong when we see every problem as equally serious; in this way, we risk being unduly harsh with the failings of others. The just desire to see our rights respected turns into a thirst for vengeance rather than a reasoned defence of our dignity.¹³

Today we recognize that being able to forgive others implies the liberating experience of understanding and forgiving ourselves. Often our mistakes, or criticism we have received from loved ones, can lead to a loss of self-esteem. We become distant from others, avoiding affection and fearful in our interpersonal relationships. Blaming others becomes falsely reassuring. We need to learn to pray over our past history, to accept ourselves, to learn how to live with our limitations, and even to forgive ourselves, in order to have this same attitude towards others.¹⁴

Christian families need to be places where every family member feels that he or she belongs to the family. The sense of belongingness is very important in a family.¹⁵ Only in an atmosphere of belongingness and love, a child can grow as a healthy person. Family members need to appreciate and encourage each other. Pope Francis notes, “Beauty, that ‘great worth’ which is other than physical or psychological appeal, enables us to appreciate the sacredness of a person, without feeling the need to possess it.”¹⁶ It is very important to pay attention to one another in a family. In the book of Genesis we read, God asks Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” Cain replies, “I don’t know; am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9). Cain had killed his brother Abel and refused to take responsibility for his crime. In the modern world, family members may not kill each other like Cain; however, they refuse to be responsible to one another. They reply like Cain, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” This is a very unhealthy situation in a family. Every member of a Christian family needs to acknowledge that he or she is a *keeper* of his or her brothers and sisters. Pope Francis notes the need for the family members

¹² See John Nieder & Thomas Thompson, *Forgive & Love Again* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2010), 119-142.

¹³ AL no. 105.

¹⁴ AL no. 107.

¹⁵ See Holly Catterton Allen & Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community & Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 47-63.

¹⁶ AL no. 127.

to encourage and appreciate each other. He notes,

A look of appreciation has enormous importance, and to begrudge it is usually hurtful. How many things do spouses and children sometimes do in order to be noticed! Much hurt and many problems result when we stop looking at one another. This lies behind the complaints and grievances we often hear in families: 'My husband does not look at me; he acts as if I were invisible.' 'Please look at me when I am talking to you.' 'My wife no longer looks at me, she only has eyes for our children.' 'In my own home nobody cares about me; they do not even see me; it is as if I did not exist.' Love opens our eyes and enables us to see, beyond all else, the great worth of a human being.¹⁷

The increase of cyber relations has increased duplicity and shallowness in inter-personal relations. There is an increasing trend among the youth to look down on social institution like marriage and opt for informal live-in relationships. They fail to see the benefits, which marriage as a social institution could bring to their lives. For Christians, marriage is not a mere contract between two individuals but a sacrament.¹⁸ Thus, it involves a deeper commitment on the part of the husband and wife. Pope Francis notes on the permanent nature of marriage. He notes,

As a social institution, marriage protects and shapes a shared commitment to deeper growth in love and commitment to one another, for the good of society as a whole. That is why marriage is more than a fleeting fashion; it is of enduring importance. Its essence derives from our human nature and social character. It involves a series of obligations born of love itself, a love so serious and generous that it is ready to face any risk.¹⁹

Organized religions are losing the space, which they enjoyed formerly in the society. With the advancements in science and technology, contemporary people question the need of following organized religions. Christianity, which was a dominant force in the Western world, has lost a big number of its followers in the last century. Thus, the number of people attending the Church services is reducing in Western world. Moreover, parents who do not practice their faith, fail to teach their children the importance of faith. Very often children who grow up in families, without any Christian education abandon their faith. This leads to steady rise of youngsters who have no connection with their local parishes. Thus, parents need to practice their faith in their homes.²⁰ They need to teach their children the importance of living the gospel values. Pope Francis emphasized the necessity of family prayers to inculcate gospel values among children. He notes,

¹⁷ AL no. 128.

¹⁸ See Chester Gills, *Catholic Faith in America* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2003), 74.

¹⁹ AL no. 131.

²⁰ See Leif Kehrwald, "Families & Christian Practice," in *Families & Faith: A Vision & Practice for Parish Leaders*, ed. Leif Kehrwald (New London: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006), 101-132.

It is essential that children actually see that, for their parents, prayer is something truly important. Hence moments of family prayer and acts of devotion can be more powerful for evangelization than any catechism class or sermon. Here I would like to express my particular gratitude to all those mothers who continue to pray, like Saint Monica, for their children who have strayed from Christ.²¹

If parents fail to nurture faith in their children, then there is a danger that they may become agnostics. Further, the stress and the pressures of life may increase frustration in them. Without the guidance of faith, they may consider their lives meaningless. This may in turn push them to harm themselves or others. Thus, it is very important for Christian parents to practice faith and pass it on to their children.²² Pope Francis, too, notes,

Raising children calls for an orderly process of handing on the faith. This is made difficult by current lifestyles, work schedules and the complexity of today's world, where many people keep up a frenetic pace just to survive. Even so, the home must continue to be the place where we learn to appreciate the meaning and beauty of the faith, to pray and to serve our neighbour.²³

In the contemporary world, people are busy with the humdrum of life. Family members often do not have time to sit down and talk with one another. With the advancement in communication technology, there is a trend to seek refuge in cyber relationships and games, which are artificial. Thus, family members avoid communicating to one another and this weakens fellowship among them. In order to overcome this difficulty, dialogue among family members needs to be the norm of a Christian family. Christian families need to come together to talk with one another about matters concerning faith and their daily lives.²⁴ Even though, this sort of real relationship may cause pain because of dissent and difference of opinions, it would certainly help a person to grow as a mature healthy member of the society. Pope Francis urges families to spend qualitative time to listen to one another. He notes,

Dialogue is essential for experiencing, expressing and fostering love in marriage and family life. Yet it can only be the fruit of a long and demanding apprenticeship. Men and women, young people and adults, communicate differently. They speak different languages and they act in different ways. Our way of asking and responding to questions, the tone we use, our timing and any number of other factors condition how well we communicate. We need to develop certain attitudes that express love and encourage

²¹ AL no. 288.

²² See Merton Strommen & Richard Hardel, *Passing on the Faith: A Radical Model for Youth & Family Ministry* (Winona: St. Mary's Press, Christian Brothers Publication, 2008), 41-75.

²³ AL no. 287.

²⁴ See James Slaughter, "Biblical Perspective for the Family," in *Christian Education: Foundations for the Future*, eds. Robert Clark, Lin Johnson & Allyn Sloat (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 555-568.

authentic dialogue. Take time, quality time. This means being ready to listen patiently and attentively to everything the other person wants to say. It requires the self-discipline of not speaking until the time is right. Instead of offering an opinion or advice, we need to be sure that we have heard everything the other person has to say. This means cultivating an interior silence that makes it possible to listen to the other person without mental or emotional distractions. Do not be rushed, put aside all of your own needs and worries, and make space.²⁵

[P]lanning free time together, moments of recreation with the children, different ways of celebrating important events, shared opportunities for spiritual growth... Once a couple no longer knows how to spend time together, one or both of them will end up taking refuge in gadgets, finding other commitments, seeking the embrace of another, or simply looking for ways to flee what has become an uncomfortable closeness.²⁶

Young married couples should be encouraged to develop a routine that gives a healthy sense of closeness and stability through shared daily rituals. These could include a morning kiss, an evening blessing, waiting at the door to welcome each other home, taking trips together and sharing household chores. Yet it also helps to break the routine with a party, and to enjoy family celebrations of anniversaries and special events. We need these moments of cherishing God's gifts and renewing our zest for life. As long as we can celebrate, we are able to rekindle our love, to free it from monotony and to colour our daily routine with hope.²⁷

If family members take time to listen to one another then they could help each other especially in times of crises and sufferings.²⁸ If there is no proper communication among family members, then some members may not feel free to share their problems with other family members. Thus, a person may suffer and seek help from outsiders, who at times may take advantage of his or her vulnerability. Pope Francis stresses the need of strong inter-personal relationship among family members especially in time of crises. He further notes that families need to take Jesus as their model in time of crisis. Jesus himself suffered and died on the cross. He alone can give real hope to all those who suffer (see Heb 2:18). Pope Francis notes,

Crises need to be faced together. This is hard, since persons sometimes withdraw in order to avoid saying what they feel; they retreat into a craven silence. At these times, it becomes all the more important to create opportunities for speaking heart to heart. Unless a couple learns to do this, they will find it harder and harder as time passes.

²⁵ AL no. 136-137.

²⁶ AL no. 225.

²⁷ AL no. 226.

²⁸ See J. N. Manokaran, *Christ & Families: Strong Families for Global Transformation* (Bangalore: Center for Contemporary Christianity, 2011), 42-47.

Communication is an art learned in moments of peace in order to be practised in moments of difficulty.²⁹

If a family is centred on Christ, he will unify and illumine its entire life. Moments of pain and difficulty will be experienced in union with the Lord's cross, and his closeness will make it possible to surmount them. In the darkest hours of a family's life, union with Jesus in his abandonment can help avoid a breakup.³⁰

Thus, Pope Francis highlights the necessity of nurturing spirituality in Christian families to grow in love for one another and bear witness to the kingdom of God.

2. Challenges to Family Life

The contemporary world poses several challenges to family life. Rapid development in science and globalization has brought revolutionary changes in the way people relate and interact with one another. Nuclear families have replaced the traditional concept of large undivided families. Further, the cutthroat competition, which is present in all fields of life, brings enormous stress on families.

In the contemporary times, youth, especially in developed countries consider the institution of marriage and family as a burden. Increase in cost of living, moral depravity and collapse of familial values is pushing the youth to abandon marriage and raise a family. Christians need to promote marriage as an institution even in the face of opposition from popular culture.³¹ However, Christians need to be very prudent when they assert their convictions based on the gospel. They need to be humble, generous and openhearted to welcome people who have opposing views about marriage. They need to present their convictions gently without exhibiting any spiritual elitism.

In addition, there is trend among contemporary people to argue in favor of absolute relativism. This is because; absolute relativism gives them so-called "freedom" to do what they like.³² However, if people exercise unrestrained freedom then this can pose a serious threat to the society. Pope Francis notes,

It is easy nowadays to confuse genuine freedom with the idea that each individual can act arbitrarily, as if there were no truths, values and principles to provide guidance, and everything were possible and permissible.³³

²⁹ AL no. 234.

³⁰ AL no. 317.

³¹ See AL no. 35

³² See Frank Canatella, *Reclaiming Religion from the Church* (Victoria: Trafford Publishing, 2005), 224-225.

³³ AL no. 34.

The increase in the number of nations legalizing same-sex marriage has challenged the traditional definition of marriage. Some contemporary people refuse to accept marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Even though the Church respects the laws of the respective nations, it strongly upholds the traditional definition of marriage. The Church calls upon all Christians to value the institution of marriage and save its destruction. Pope Francis too encourages Christians to rediscover the beauty of the sacrament of matrimony as the basis for beginning a new family. He notes,

Many countries are witnessing a legal deconstruction of the family, tending to adopt models based almost exclusively on the autonomy of the individual will. Surely it is legitimate and right to reject older forms of the traditional family marked by authoritarianism and even violence, yet this should not lead to a disparagement of marriage itself, but rather to the rediscovery of its authentic meaning and its renewal.³⁴

Marriage is a sacrament according to the tradition of the Catholic Church. Thus, marriage is an indissoluble bond between a man and a woman. Among all other sacraments, the sacrament of matrimony is the only sacrament, which a priest/deacon does not administer but is present as a witness. The man and the woman who ties the bond of marriage is the principle agent to administer this sacrament.³⁵ Thus, a man and a woman promise before God to accept the sacrament of matrimony as a sign of their mutual love and trust for one another.

As matrimony is a sacrament, the Catholic Church does not encourage divorce. However, in some cases there may be a genuine reason for declaring the marriage as invalid. Apart from these exceptions, separation needs to be the last resort. The Church permits separation only if the dignity of the concerned person is at stake or there is danger of violence.³⁶ Pope Francis notes,

In some cases, respect for one's own dignity and the good of the children requires not giving in to excessive demands or preventing a grave injustice, violence or chronic ill-treatment. In such cases, 'separation becomes inevitable. At times it even becomes morally necessary, precisely when it is a matter of removing the more vulnerable spouse or young children from serious injury due to abuse and violence, from humiliation and exploitation, and from disregard and indifference.' Even so, 'separation must be considered as a last resort, after all other reasonable attempts at reconciliation have proved vain.'³⁷

³⁴ AL no. 53.

³⁵ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 1623. Available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c3a7.htm (accessed July 26, 2016).

³⁶ See Joseph Domfeh-Boateng, *The Catholic Church: Easy Answers to Frequently Asked Questions* (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2014), 129-137.

³⁷ AL no. 241.

Conspicuous lack of father or mother at homes causes great distress to children. Because of the pressures at workplaces, parents find it difficult to spend time with their children. However, parents need to realize that their presence at homes with their children is very important for the sound growth of their children. They need to devise ways to spend qualitative time with their children. Excursions and vacations may be a good way to relax and enjoy as a family. Parents need to use these occasions to build strong familial bonds with their children. Pope Francis noted the lack of father figure in families might lead to a crisis in the families. If children do not find anyone to guide them in their stages of growth, then they might feel abandoned and pick up unhealthy habits.³⁸ Thus, Pope Francis noted the importance of the presence of fathers in their families. He noted,

We often hear that ours is ‘a society without fathers.’ In Western culture, the father figure is said to be symbolically absent, missing or vanished. Manhood itself seems to be called into question. The result has been an understandable confusion. ‘At first, this was perceived as a liberation: liberation from the father as master, from the father as the representative of a law imposed from without, from the father as the arbiter of his children’s happiness and an obstacle to the emancipation and autonomy of young people. In some homes authoritarianism once reigned and, at times, even oppression.’ Yet, ‘as often happens, one goes from one extreme to the other. In our day, the problem no longer seems to be the overbearing presence of the father so much as his absence, his not being there. Fathers are often so caught up in themselves and their work, and at times in their own self-fulfilment, that they neglect their families. They leave the little ones and the young to themselves.’ The presence of the father, and hence his authority, is also impacted by the amount of time given over to the communications and entertainment media. Nowadays authority is often considered suspect and adults treated with impertinence. They themselves become uncertain and so fail to offer sure and solid guidance to their children.³⁹

Life is not easy for contemporary people. They have to face various challenges at the place of their work or study. This increases stress in them. Some people resort to unhealthy means to find an escape route. Moreover, with the weakening of trust among family members, some people avoid being with family members. Such people may get addicted to things or habits, which could harm them. Thus, families especially parents need to teach their children the art of relieving stress within the family. If parents can create a pleasant atmosphere of openness in the family, then children might feel free to share their problems with their parents. Thus, parents can understand the problems their children are facing and work together to solve it. When parents and children work together to find a solution to the problem, then they can grow in love and trust for one another. Pope Francis urges parents to take time to talk to their

³⁸ See Ashely Aurthurton Massicotte, *In Your Son’s & Daughter’s Shoes: The Mistakes Parents Make* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2008), 20-23.

³⁹ AL no. 176.

children and understand their needs. He notes,

In many cases, parents come home exhausted, not wanting to talk, and many families no longer even share a common meal. Distractions abound, including an addiction to television. This makes it all the more difficult for parents to hand on the faith to their children. Other responses pointed to the effect of severe stress on families, who often seem more caught up with securing their future than with enjoying the present. This is a broader cultural problem, aggravated by fears about steady employment, finances and the future of children.⁴⁰

Addiction to drugs, alcohol, cyber games etc is increasing in the society. It is ruining families.⁴¹ Disturbed family backgrounds, negative peer influence and moral depravity are some of the major reasons for increase in number of addicts. People are longing for belongingness. If they fail to seek it in their own families, then they search for alternative ways to seek refuge. Thus, sometimes people get addicted to drugs, alcohol, gambling, cyber games, etc. Their addiction brings tremendous harm to themselves and their families. It also affects the entire society. Thus, parents need to take responsibility to take care of their children in order to prevent them from getting addicted to drugs or any other thing. Pope Francis notes the dangers of addiction to drugs. He notes,

Drug use was also mentioned as one of the scourges of our time, causing immense suffering and even breakup for many families. The same is true of alcoholism, gambling and other addictions. The family could be the place where these are prevented and overcome.⁴²

The increasing graying population and declining birth rate is leading to the reduction in the number of taxpayers.⁴³ Thus, there is increasing financial stress on states. With the decrease in revenue collection, states are exploring ways to cut down on their expenditures. Public health insurance schemes, public education and social welfare schemes are the usual targets of the state, to reduce their budgets. In the process, states consider non-taxpayers like the elderly and the disabled as a burden to the society. They try to bring legislations to legalize euthanasia and terminating pregnancies of women detected with fetus' having disabilities. Christians cannot remain as mute spectators to these unhealthy legislations, which trample upon the dignity of a human person. Moreover, Christian families having children with disabilities need to take utmost care of these children. The local parish and all the neighboring Christian

⁴⁰ AL no. 50.

⁴¹ See Craig Nakken, *Reclaim Your Family from Addiction: How Couples and Families Recover Love & Meaning* (Center City: Hazelden, 2000), 151-186.

⁴² AL no. 51.

⁴³ See Peter Karl Kresl & Daniele Letri, *The Aging Population & Competitiveness of the Cities: Benefits to the Urban Economy* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 2010), 12-29.

families need to reach out to such families to support them in every way possible. These actions can serve as a powerful witness to the secularized world to uphold the sanctity of life. Pope Francis strongly supports the rights and dignity of people with special needs. He notes,

The [synod] Fathers also called particular attention to ‘families of persons with special needs, where the unexpected challenge of dealing with a disability can upset a family’s equilibrium, desires and expectations... Families who lovingly accept the difficult trial of a child with special needs are greatly to be admired. They render the Church and society an invaluable witness of faithfulness to the gift of life. In these situations, the family can discover, together with the Christian community, new approaches, new ways of acting, a different way of understanding and identifying with others, by welcoming and caring for the mystery of the frailty of human life. People with disabilities are a gift for the family and an opportunity to grow in love, mutual aid and unity... If the family, in the light of the faith, accepts the presence of persons with special needs, they will be able to recognize and ensure the quality and value of every human life, with its proper needs, rights and opportunities. This approach will promote care and services on behalf of these disadvantaged persons and will encourage people to draw near to them and provide affection at every stage of their life’.⁴⁴

Thus, the contemporary world poses several challenges to Christian families. Christian families need to be aware of these challenges. They need to face these challenges with courage and live the values of the gospel.

3. Church’s Pastoral Approach

It is true that the contemporary world poses several challenges to the Christian families. However, Pope Francis urges pastors to help Christian families to face the various challenges. He further notes the importance of being realistic while dealing with the various problems of the present times. He notes the over-stress of theological concept of marriage may alienate people from the Church. He notes,

At times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families. This excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God’s grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite.⁴⁵

Pope Francis notes that the pastors need not be judgmental while they deal with people

⁴⁴ AL no. 47.

⁴⁵ AL no. 36.

having difficulties with their married life. He notes the role of the pastor is not to be a taskmaster but a mentor. He notes, “We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.”⁴⁶

Non-sacramental marriages are on a rise all over the world. Pastors need to reach out to these couples with extreme sensitivity and care.⁴⁷ They need to be generous to listen to such couples and provide them pastoral care. Pastors need to accept these couples and show them the right way ahead. If pastors succeed in taking care of such couples, then they could influence them to solemnize their marriage in the Church. Thus, an openhearted attitude on the behalf of the pastor could help couples to reintegrate in the Church. Pope Francis notes,

Seeing things with the eyes of Christ inspires the Church’s pastoral care for the faithful who are living together, or are only married civilly, or are divorced and remarried. Following this divine pedagogy, the Church turns with love to those who participate in her life in an imperfect manner: she seeks the grace of conversion for them; she encourages them to do good, to take loving care of each other and to serve the community in which they live and work... When a couple in an irregular union attains a noteworthy stability through a public bond and is characterized by deep affection, responsibility towards the children and the ability to overcome trials, this can be seen as an opportunity, where possible, to lead them to celebrate the sacrament of Matrimony.⁴⁸

The Church needs pastors who are generous and prudent. For this purpose, the Church hierarchy needs to train the future pastors (seminarians) to deal with the couples having various problems with their married life. Firstly, the seminarian himself needs to be stable and matured. He needs to have a well-integrated personality. He needs to have a capacity to grasp the various existential problems present in the society. He needs to be prudent in dealing with cases, which need utmost care. A seminarian cannot learn the art of dealing with the real problems in the closed walls of the seminaries. Rectors of the seminaries need to make programs to expose the seminarian to live for certain periods with his own family and if possible, with other families. This experience could help the seminarian to get in touch with the reality of the world. Thus, he can train himself to deal with the various problems, which the modern families face in the world. Pope Francis notes,

Seminarians...training does not always allow them to explore their own psychological and affective background and experiences. Some come from troubled families, with absent parents and a lack of emotional stability. There is a need to ensure that the formation process can enable them to attain the maturity and psychological balance needed for their future ministry. Family bonds are essential for reinforcing healthy self-esteem. It is important for families to be part of the seminary process and priestly life,

⁴⁶ AL no. 37.

⁴⁷ See Peter Elliot, *What God Has Joined: The Sacramentality of Marriage*, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 191-219.

⁴⁸ AL no. 78.

since they help to reaffirm these and to keep them well grounded in reality. It is helpful for seminarians to combine time in the seminary with time spent in parishes. There they can have greater contact with the concrete realities of family life, since in their future ministry they will largely be dealing with families.⁴⁹

Pastors need to be regularly in contact with Christian families to cater to their pastoral needs. Further, they must make time to pray with the families and encourage them to spend time in family prayers. In the modern world, families are finding it very difficult to come together to pray. However, praying together as a family is very important to bind the family. Gathering daily for family prayers and regularly attending Church services can greatly help individuals in families to grow in faith and be instruments to spread the kingdom of God. Pope Francis notes the role of pastors in educating families about the importance of praying together as a family. He notes,

We pastors have to encourage families to grow in faith. This means encouraging frequent confession, spiritual direction and occasional retreats. It also means encouraging family prayer during the week, since ‘the family that prays together stays together.’ When visiting our people’s homes, we should gather all the members of the family and briefly pray for one another, placing the family in the Lord’s hands. It is also helpful to encourage each of the spouses to find time for prayer alone with God, since each has his or her secret crosses to bear. Why shouldn’t we tell God our troubles and ask him to grant us the healing and help we need to remain faithful?⁵⁰

Family prayer is a special way of expressing and strengthening this paschal faith. A few minutes can be found each day to come together before the living God, to tell him our worries, to ask for the needs of our family, to pray for someone experiencing difficulty, to ask for help in showing love, to give thanks for life and for its blessings, and to ask Our Lady to protect us beneath her maternal mantle. With a few simple words, this moment of prayer can do immense good for our families. The various expressions of popular piety are a treasure of spirituality for many families. The family’s communal journey of prayer culminates by sharing together in the Eucharist, especially in the context of the Sunday rest. Jesus knocks on the door of families, to share with them the Eucharistic supper (Rev 3:20). There, spouses can always seal anew the paschal covenant which united them and which ought to reflect the covenant which God sealed with mankind in the cross. The Eucharist is the sacrament of the new covenant, where Christ’s redemptive work is carried out (Lk 22:20). The close bond between married life and the Eucharist thus becomes all the more clear. For the food of the Eucharist offers the spouses the strength and incentive needed to live the marriage covenant each day as a domestic church.⁵¹

⁴⁹ AL no. 203.

⁵⁰ AL no. 227.

⁵¹ AL no. 318.

Pastors need to speak against abortion. Even though the state may permit abortion as a means to end pregnancy, pastors need to speak on the behalf of the unborn child. The unborn child is not able to defend his or her cause. Thus, it is the duty of all Christians to uphold the right to life of the unborn child. At times, there may be delicate cases and pastors need to be very sensitive while dealing such persons. Christians need to speak for life, without resorting to any violence. They need to reach out to people, who are planning abortion. They need to listen to their problems and do everything possible to support them in their difficult times. They need to convince people, to abandon their plans to terminate pregnancy and accept the unborn child as a gift of God. Pope Francis notes,

Here I feel it urgent to state that, if the family is the sanctuary of life, the place where life is conceived and cared for, it is a horrendous contradiction when it becomes a place where life is rejected and destroyed. So great is the value of a human life, and so inalienable the right to life of an innocent child growing in the mother's womb, that no alleged right to one's own body can justify a decision to terminate that life, which is an end in itself and which can never be considered the "property" of another human being. The family protects human life in all its stages, including its last.⁵²

Pastors of the local parishes need to take the help of the various ecclesial movements functioning in the Church.⁵³ Members of the various ecclesial movements are usually from laity. They might have better knowledge about the problems, which the families are facing. They could help the pastor, by reaching out to these families and supporting them in their crises. They could encourage families to come to their local parishes and share their problems with the pastor. Pastors need to guide the members of the various ecclesial movements to make contact with disturbed families and bring them back to the Church. Pope Francis urges pastors to be open to these movements and seek their help for the good of the Church. He notes,

Parishes, movements, schools and other Church institutions can help in a variety of ways to support families and help them grow. These might include: meetings of couples living in the same neighbourhood, brief retreats for couples; talks by experts on concrete issues facing families, marriage counselling, home missionaries who help couples discuss their difficulties and desires, social services dealing with family problems like addiction, infidelity and domestic violence, programmes of spiritual growth, workshops for parents with troubled children and family meetings. The parish office should be prepared to deal helpfully and sensitively with family needs and be able to make referrals, when necessary, to those who can help. There is also the contribution made by groups of married couples that provide assistance as part of their commitment to service, prayer, formation and

⁵² AL no. 83.

⁵³ See Brendan Leahy, *Ecclesial Movements & Communities: Origins, Significance & Issues* (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2011), 145-149.

mutual support. Such groups enable couples to be generous, to assist other families and to share the faith; at the same time they strengthen marriages and help them to grow.⁵⁴

Pastors also need to make use of all opportunities to reach out to couples who have fallen away from Church. Even though people may not regularly attend Church services, they do join for solemn occasions and celebrations. Pastors need to be very sensitive while they preach during these occasions. They need to prepare their sermons well, to encourage and attract people back to the Church. If their sermons sound judgmental then there is a possibility of pushing people further away from the Church.⁵⁵ Pastors need to be aware that their mission is to be with the people and not for the people. They need to be very kind and welcoming. Their openness and generosity could attract people to come back to the Church. Pope Francis notes,

It is true that many couples, once married, drop out of the Christian community. Often, however, we ourselves do not take advantage of those occasions when they do return, to remind them of the beautiful ideal of Christian marriage and the support that our parishes can offer them. I think, for example, of the Baptism and First Holy Communion of their children, or the funerals or weddings of their relatives or friends. Almost all married couples reappear on these occasions, and we should take greater advantage of this. Another way of growing closer is by blessing homes or by bringing a pilgrim image of Our Lady to houses in the neighbourhood; this provides an opportunity for a pastoral conversation about the family's situation. It could also be helpful to ask older married couples to help younger couples in the neighbourhood by visiting them and offering guidance in the early years of marriage. Given the pace of life today, most couples cannot attend frequent meetings; still, we cannot restrict our pastoral outreach to small and select groups. Nowadays, pastoral care for families has to be fundamentally missionary, going out to where people are. We can no longer be like a factory, churning out courses that for the most part are poorly attended.⁵⁶

Christian families need to be aware of their social obligations.⁵⁷ Christian families need to be the *leaven*, which promotes the healthy growth of society. They need to avoid any action that goes against the values of the gospel. They need to be role models for others to build bonds of love within their families. Pope Francis calls upon Christian families to execute their vocation to spread the fragrance of Christ in the modern society. He notes,

Families should not see themselves as a refuge from society, but instead go forth from their homes in a spirit of solidarity with others. In this way, they become a hub for

⁵⁴ AL no. 229.

⁵⁵ See Joseph Mele, *The Sacred Conversation: The Art of Catholic Preaching & the New Evangelization* (Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2013), 99-114.

⁵⁶ AL no. 230.

⁵⁷ See Simeon Tsetim Iber, *The Principle of Subsidiarity in Catholic Social Thought* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 141-142.

integrating persons into society and a point of contact between the public and private spheres. Married couples should have a clear awareness of their social obligations.⁵⁸

Christian marriages thus enliven society by their witness of fraternity, their social concern, their outspokenness on behalf of the underprivileged, their luminous faith and their active hope. Their fruitfulness expands and in countless ways makes God's love present in society.⁵⁹

Thus, Pope Francis asks all the pastors, members of ecclesial movements and faithful Christian families to come together to witness their faith in the world. There are various problems, which are plaguing the modern society. However, Church pastors and leaders need to train themselves to deal with these problems with gentleness and love.

Conclusion

In the contemporary world, Christian families have a tremendous task of witnessing their faith. Pope Francis through his Apostolic Exhortation *AL* encourages Christian families to make Christ as the center of their lives. He emphasizes on spiritual renewal of family members to rediscover the importance of family life. Further, he raises the various challenges, which families face in the modern world. Secularization and modernity are challenging the traditional definitions of marriage and family. Pope Francis calls on all the pastors, leaders and Christian families to be realistic while dealing with various problems facing the modern society. However, he urges them to hold on to the values of gospel and live them in their lives. Thus, *AL* is a timely document, which addresses the concerns of the Christian families in the fast changing world.

⁵⁸ *AL* no. 181.

⁵⁹ *AL* no. 184.